Critical Commentary for Screenwriting MA Module (2023) on:

- *Flowers in Bloom screenplay*
- *Out of Body concept drafts*

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Flowers in Bloom

Flowers in Bloom is inspired by my own experiences of being a queer woman in a rural area. Partly based off the riverside village of Flushing (Cornwall), I wanted Highdon to have the same idyllic allure to it that most rural villages do, and a big cornerstone of this picturesque atmosphere is the idea of a town festival. Having grown up in Cornwall, the idea of a small-town festival that encompasses only a local community is very close to my heart. Taking inspiration from festivities such as Flushing's Regatta week[1], Mylor's May Day[2], and Helston's Flora Day[3], I wanted Highdon's Easter Festival to evoke the same feelings of community and jubilance. However, it was important to me to demonstrate the reality of living in communities like Highdon. Taking the opening to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet (1986)* to heart, I wanted to juxtapose the Summery perfection of rurality with a dark underbelly; often bigotry thrives in small rural communities. By making the Easter Festival as bright and colourful as possible, it makes Henry's comments stand out even further as this intentionally idyllic world is tainted by his darkness.

Of course, owing to the limitations of writing for a commercial short, being fully aware of how many settings and characters I could use was essential. Having one primary setting with three locations getting greater focus whilst centring on a protagonist, an antagonist, two side characters, and two minor characters, I feel I was able to create a cohesive world within the confines of 10 minutes.

It was only very recently in the film and entertainment industry that, not just a woman, but a queer woman of colour could be the protagonist of a short film, whilst a white heterosexual man the antagonist. Owing to the long history of institutionalised censorship and bigotry (given cadence due to things like the Hays Code[4]) within the entertainment industry, it's more important than ever that characters from minority groups are represented, even in situations that people may not expect them to be in. As such, it was necessary to me that Cora had a role of importance within Highdon; a lot of insular rural towns still operate on a medieval form of hierarchy: one person runs the local pub, another other is an electrician etc. By making Cora a priest, I was able to give her a bigger presence in the village and to imply that she has established something for herself and been rather successful with her goals (she's also the proprietor of a flower shop). Despite that, most of the Highdon populous are rather unphased to Henry's comments towards her at the church, owing to having lived their lives around such language: the reality of living in a rural community as a minority is something that a worrying amount of people do not acknowledge as an issue which is why I wanted Cora as the protagonist to force people to reconcile with the reality that many minority groups must contend with when living in these types of areas. That said, I did not want Cora to be the perfect Christian woman: I tried my best to make her a character which constantly tries to play into the nice persona she puts on whilst bottling how she really feels: for example, she repeatedly tries to rise above Henry's bigotry but during the climax at the church she openly berates him. Sadly, I don't think I did a fantastic job at this as Cora ended being a rather flat character, not undergoing any kind of Hero's Journey[5]; despite this however, I do think she's a compelling protagonist.

Henry does undergo a more traditional arc throughout the story. Using, Syd Field's 3 act-structure[6], we can easily identify when Henry's character develops: his inciting incident is his comments at the church, the rising action occurs outside the flower shop and in his bedroom, and the climax occurs

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[1] Flushing Regatta Week event page (2015, accessed 13/01/24 via https://www.mylor.com/event/flushing-regatta-week/)
[2] Mylor May Day photos: The Falmouth Packet (2013, accessed 13/01/24 via https://www.falmouthpacket.co.uk/news/10426757.mylor-may-day-celebrations-pictures/)
[3] Helston Flora Day (accessed 13/01/24 via https://helstonfloraday.org.uk/)
[4] Hays, Will H and MPAA – The 'Hays' Code (1934-1968)
[5] Campbell, Joseph – The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949)
[6] Field, Syd – Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting (1979)

within the church itself. Henry's journey is one of starting to break free from the propaganda that has gripped a lot of, primarily, young men; commentators like Andrew Tate and Ben Shapiro have managed to worm their way into the heads of a lot of young men, convincing them to see women as objects and queer people (especially trans women) as rapists or paedophiles; this is why the Tucker Carlson clip plays in Henry's room, to demonstrate the type of people he's being influenced by. This is of course then compounded with how people of colour are vilified through the media; the rising racism in the UK since Brexit is proof enough[7]. In many ways, Cora and Henry are representations of larger groups of people, and Highdon as wider society; they are microcosms. For Henry, someone who has been conditioned to expect everything be handed to him, to see Cora, a regular woman just simply living her life and succeeding, it throws in his face and threatens everything he's learnt.

Writing *Flowers in Bloom* was an enjoyable challenge. Short films as a medium are extremely powerful if done well, as they tend to offer a much more concise and poignant message to an audience than that of a feature or TV series, owing to how the message often needs to be spread across 90–120-minute chunks. I certainly find it to be a valuable medium and one that I wholeheartedly think needs more recognition in the entertainment industry. One of the films we looked at this semester was *The Fisherman (2006)*; despite it only being 6 minutes, I found it extremely touching and, seeing as the film was set in Cornwall, hit a very strong cord with me: its message of industrialisation, capitalism and the death of the small business was something that a lot of Cornish people are experiencing. The emotions I felt whilst watching *The Fisherman* were ultimately what I wished to emulate for *Flowers in Bloom*, and I believe I've mostly succeeded at that.

[7] Booth, Robert - Racism rising since Brexit vote, nationwide study reveals (2019, accessed 14/01/24 via https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/20/racism-on-the-rise-since-brexit-vote-nationwide-study-reveals)

Out of Body

Robert Mckee, in his 2000 story seminar said, "Structure comes out of character"[8]. To that end, I wanted a story about a transgender girl, but what structure could accurately depict the struggle of trans people? The body-swap genre. Although primarily played for comedy (*Freaky Friday (Mark Waters, 2003)*, *Jumanji (Jake Kasdan, 2017 & 19)*), body-swap can also be a force for hard-hitting drama. The animated film *Your Name (Makoto Shinkai, 2016)* demonstrates how body-swapping can be a vehicle for romance, fantasy, and hope. For me, the idea of body-swapping is hand-crafted to be the ideal transgender narrative structure: typically, it enables at least 2 characters, that are more often than not at odds with either each other or themselves (often relating to their gender), to be literally placed in the shoes of a position they would have otherwise not been able to understand. Both structures can be found in the films I have referenced: in *Freaky Friday* it enables Tess and Anna to mend their parent-child bond, and in *Jumanji: The Next Level* Spencer is able to understand his masculinity. With all this in mind, it is striking to me how often the genre shrugs off the idea of living in the opposite gendered body as comedy: naturally it would be surprising for the characters involved, but structurally, gender-body-swapping is rarely truly given the significance it deserves, with male characters often ogling their new-bodies (in line with Laura Mulvey's male gaze[9]), and female characters reacting with disgust if the character is not skinny or conventionally attractive. Male characters, notably, do not react this way, as body-swapping with 'unattractive' female characters does not occur, owing to the institutionalised misogyny in Hollywood, perhaps most poignantly exemplified by Harvey Weinstein, and the numerous women he abused[10].

Hence, when creating the pitch for *Out of Body*, I felt that body-swap was the ideal structure, it just needed a suitable story and plot. Notably every example of body-swap I listed all involve teenagers. Owing to how body-swap encapsulates puberty, sexual attraction, discomfort in one's body and coming-of-age, all of which are rampant in young people who are scared for and often unprepared for their futures; their anxieties are made manifest by being beyond their own skin. It shouldn't be any surprise then that *Out of Body* is a high-school coming-of-age drama. Focusing on a transgender girl named Emily, and her cisgender bully named Liv, the story is ultimately how two diametrically opposed young women manage to breakthrough their animosity of one another to become friends. Taking inspiration from recent queer high-school dramas such as *Heartstopper (Netflix, 2022-present)* and *Sex Education (Netflix, 2019-2023)*, I wanted to create a narrative in which it was clear from the offset that the queer character was not the problem: it was the world they inhabit that's hostile. Aside from the fact that Liv is a bully, I also chose to set the film in a location I'm familiar with: my hometown of 23 years, Penryn (Cornwall). As a university town, Penryn is more forward thinking than the rest of Cornwall, but that is not intended as a compliment. It is only in the last 2 years that a substantial change to the mindset of its residents has occurred that has made people more accepting to queer people. Similarly to *Flowers in Bloom*, I wanted to remove the idyllic allure of the hotspot tourist destination that is my childhood and heritage.

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[8] Mckee, Robert – Story Seminar (2000: Structure comes out of character. It comes from inside a character's mind. If you do not get inside, you inevitably write emotional cliché. You can ask yourself, if I were this character, what would I be doing? You might rehearse several variations until you think all is covered, but reality is never like that. In each scene, you might think, what would Ido were that me? Then think, what is the opposite of that? What is beyond opposite or off the wall?)

[9] Mulvey, Laura – Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (2009, accessed 16/01/24 via https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey,%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf)

[10] BBC – Harvey Weinstein charged with rape following New York arrest (2018, accessed 17/01/24 via https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-44257202)

The outcome of the plot (that the two girls become friends) had an obvious route for Liv: she ends the film fully empathising and understanding Emily's pain, wanting to protect her and to nourish her growth as a woman. For Emily though, it wasn't immediately obvious; I couldn't have her learn nothing from being in the body of her bully, so I this is where Liv's reason for bullying was born. Liv has an exceptionally hard homelife, constantly monitored and controlled by her mother to the point that she restricts who she can and cannot be friends with; even when, where and what foods she eats. By contrast, Emily has a very good homelife, with both of her dads being very supportive and loving of her and allowing her a lot of freedom. In this way, the narrative effectively has dual protagonists, a structure that I feel works very well for characters that are, in essence, mirrors to one another with much more in common than they first realise.

In comparison to Cora from Flowers in Bloom, I feel that I made Emily a much more interesting and intriguing protagonist, with a more considered and natural place in the film's world. Whilst this is in part due to the lack of restrictions placed on feature films as opposed to shorts, as well as my own familiarity with the setting, it is also due to how Emily is a trans girl, and not 'just' a queer woman; there are certain representational lenses that films are often scrutinised under to determine if a film reaches a 'minimum requirement' for portraying minority characters fairly and devoid of stereotypes. Two examples are the Bechdel-Wallace (for women[11]), and the Riz test (for Muslims[12]). In my research, I only found the following in relation to a transgender version of these tests:

> *"The Topside test for trans literature, created by literary editors Riley MacLeod … and Tom Leger, asks that a book include multiple trans characters who know each other, who talk to each other about something other than medical transition procedures…" – Nick Douglas[13]*

Considering that the Bechdel-Wallace test was, by Alison Bechdel's own admittance, meant as a "little lesbian joke in a feminist alternative newspaper"[14], I don't find it to be a very intuitive way of measuring or judging female representation in media. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that I find Macleod's and Leger's Topside test, which copies the Bechdel-Wallace test's format, to be equally as unintuitive. For this reason, I created my own 'test' for trans characters: the "Gwen test". Highlighted in red are qualities that, if a film possesses, will fail my test, whilst those highlighted in green I believe can be done tastefully (if considered well):

1. Are they a victim of bullying or harassment in relation to their gender identity or expression?
2. Is their physical body depicted to be a 'curse'? All transgender bodies are, by virtue of their existence, a defiance of Western gender expectations; trans people are not a monolith. One trans man may love his vagina, another may hate it.

[11] Trent, John F – Bechdel claims… test was originally a joke (2023, accessed 16/01/24 via https://boundingintocomics.com/2023/10/05/alison-bechdel-claims-feminist-bechdel-test-was-originally-a-joke-dismayed-about-films-taking-shortcuts-with-strong-female-characters/)

[12] Fundación de Cultura Islámica – The Riz Test: the misrepresentation of Muslims in film and TV (2021, accessed 16/01/24 via https://twistislamophobia.org/en/2021/06/24/riz_test/:~:text=In%20their%20own%20words,%20the%20Riz%20Test:%20%E2%80%9Cis,set%20that%20measures%20how%20poorly%20Muslims%20are%20represented.%E2%80%9D)

[13] Douglas, Nick - The Bechdel Test, and Other Media Representation Tests, Explained (2017, accessed 17/01/24 via https://lifehacker.com/the-bechdel-test-and-other-media-representation-tests-1819324045)

[14] Morlan, Kinsee – Comic-con vs The Bechdel Test (2014, accessed 16/01/24 via https://web.archive.org/web/20150316161800/http://www.sdcitybeat.com/sandiego/article-13243-comic-con-vs-the-bechdel-test.html)

3. Are they shunned for using the private spaces (bathrooms etc.) of their true gender?
4. Is a character 'clockable' (able to be identified as trans through body features, vocal tone etc.)?
5. If the character is trans feminine, is she presented as sexually predatory or perverted, particularly around children and other women?
6. If the character is trans masculine, is he presented as a 'confused lesbian' and / or have little autonomy?
7. If the character is non-binary, are they regarded as being 'intentionally awkward' and / or as attention seeking?
8. Are they presented as a threat to the Western way of life?
9. Is a trans character made to be as cis-passing as possible, so you cannot tell they are transgender at all and / or is there no attempt to discuss their transgender identity, even casually?

Creating *Out of Body* was hugely important to me. The burden of representation often means minority creatives feel pigeon-holed into only creating depressing narratives about their culture or life and, whilst I have done that to an extent, I also want to portray the joy in being trans. Trans euphoria is a scarcity in comparison to trans dysphoria, and though Emily's euphoria may just be a distant future for her, creating this pitch certainly gave me some much needed happiness.

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